

■ Building a Web Presence

What to Consider When Developing a Site

by Export America

Even if you choose not to sell your goods or services on-line, a business Web site can be a virtual marketing brochure that you can update on demand with little or no cost. Your presence on the Internet can be a useful marketing tool by providing richer pre-sales information or post-sales support and service. This might temporarily differentiate your product or service from that of your competitors. Electronic marketing has lessened the disadvantage that small businesses have faced for years when competing with larger businesses.

E-commerce has redefined the marketplace, altered business strategies, and allowed global competition between local businesses. The term “electronic commerce” has evolved from meaning simply electronic shopping to representing all aspects of business and market processes enabled by the Internet and other technologies.

Today’s business emphasis is on e-commerce—rapid electronic interactions enabled by the Internet and other connected computer and telephone networks. Rapid business transactions and unparalleled access to information is changing consumer behavior and expectations.

Many small businesses assume that the Internet has little value to them, because they feel that their products or

services cannot be easily sold on-line. But inexpensive information processing and electronic media can help most small businesses provide better, faster customer service and communication.

THINGS TO CONSIDER WHEN PLANNING A WEB SITE

1. Do I need a Web site?

Maybe you do not need to have a presence on the Web. It could be that your marketing dollars are better spent somewhere else. However, many people will not discover your products or services through any other means. The Internet has become an expected tool of modern business, like the phone or fax, and companies or professionals without a Web site may appear behind the times.

2. What are my goals for the site?

If you do decide to move ahead, it is important to know why you are building the site. Is it for sales or marketing? Is it a tool for communication or an on-line brochure? Do you want to sell products through the site, or just educate consumers about them? Do you want to increase membership in your organization, or offer Web-based benefits to current members? Do you want visitors to e-mail you? Call you? Subscribe to a newsletter? Knowing your goals will help focus your ideas for the site.

3. What am I trying to sell or promote?

Even if you do not like the idea of selling yourself, it is what we all do, every

day, if we want to be successful. Do not be afraid of sales and marketing. Finding the answer to this question will determine what are the most important themes of the site, what to name the buttons, and the tone to use when writing the content.

4. What are the steps to getting a Web site up and running?

Design and development come first. The architecture of the site needs to be selected. An appropriate look and feel must be designed. The copy needs to be written, and any additional tools such as on-line forms, shopping carts, and audio clips need to be added.

Hosting is another fundamental issue. Just as you might rent office space, your Web site needs to be hosted somewhere so people can reach it.

Lastly, upkeep is important. Once live, a good site continues to post fresh material, giving people a reason to return.

5. What content do I need to build the site?

First, create an outline around the themes you want to promote. Second, remember that the outline represents pages that need content—text and images that will help educate your visitors. The images may include a logo or photos of people or products. Poor quality photos or bad clip art can make the most attractive site look amateurish; sometimes no photos can be better than poor ones.

6. Do I hire a professional or do it myself?

If you have the skills, the time, the talent, and most importantly the desire to design and develop the site, then by all means, do so. However, keep in mind that when you hire a professional—whether it is to create a Web site, change your oil, or give you financial advice—you immediately acquire thousands of hours of experience, access to the latest tools of the trade, and insider knowledge of the industry. Since an unprofessional Web site can be worse than no site at all, it is strongly suggested that you do what you do best and outsource the rest.

7. What are my responsibilities to create an effective site?

Even if you hire a professional Web developer, your input is essential because no one knows your business as well as you do. Before you hire a developer, you should review his portfolio and ask for referrals. You should expect to help develop a site outline with your developer, pull the copy together, and give input on the layouts presented to you.

Once your site is live, you should also budget time to add content on a regular basis. You should reply to e-mails and inquiries in a timely fashion to show you have not abandoned your site.

8. What will this cost for start-up and ongoing maintenance?

This is a young industry, so there is still a wide range in billing rates. The *Pricing Guide for Web Services*, second edition, found pricing from \$25 to \$250 an hour for Web work, and Web pages from \$30 to \$1,500. As a rule, you get what you pay for. An experienced designer and developer are worth their weight in gold.

Start-up costs for a Web site will include registering a domain name (currently \$35 for one year, according to www.all-domains.com), and a one-time setup fee

on a Web server of \$25–\$50. A simple site between five and 15 pages might cost between \$1,200 and \$3,500. You should add approximately \$1,000 or more if you will be adding on-line ordering. Add-ons such as bulletin boards, multimedia, newsletters, and forms will cost extra.

Ongoing costs include hosting fees that can range from \$30 to \$100 per month. Regular updates to your site can cost \$25 to 100 per instance, depending on the amount of content involved.

9. How do I attract more traffic to my site?

Search engines, links, advertising, and more. A good developer will make your site search engine user-friendly and submit your site to search engines and directories on your behalf. You should create reciprocal links with complementary sites.

Consider advertising on specific search engines, e-mail newsletters, and traditional media. Put your URL (Web site address) on your business cards, stationery, voice mail, and so on. Send out free e-mail newsletters. Add a “Recommend this Site to a Friend” form on your Web site. Continually update and improve on your site. Reviewing your site’s traffic reports can alert you to what visitors are finding interesting and what they are ignoring.

10. How will I know that my site is successful?

Look at your goals every three to six months. Have you met them? If so, is it time to create new, more challenging goals? ■

WEB PRESENCE RESOURCES

Domain Registration

Search for domain names: www.allwhois.com

List of accredited domain name registrars:

www.icann.org

You may want to register the same name with different endings (e.g., .net, .com, and .org) as well as alternate spellings to ensure that customers will be able to find you no matter which ending they happen to type.

Hosting

Find a host for your site: www.ispcheck.com

Developers (articles)

“How to Hire a Web Designer”

www.inc.com/articles/2001/06/22731.html

“How to Cut Costs with Web Developers”

www.netb2b.com/webPriceIndex

Design and Development Tips

Design tips:

<http://personalweb.about.com/library/weekly/aa041601a.htm>

Good deeds in Web design:

www.useit.com/alertbox/991003.html

Usability checklist for developers:

www.pantos.org/atw/35317.html

Market/Promote Your Web Site

www.wilsonweb.com/webmarket

Additional Development Information

www.goodpractices.com

www.useit.com

www.web-source.net

www.inc.com/guides/biz_online/24012.html

<http://sbdnet.utsa.edu/sbic/e-com.htm>

www.flyte.biz/resources/feature-articles.html

Resources used to compile this article included “10 New Questions to Ask Before Setting Up a Web Site,” (www.flyte.biz/resources/feature-articles.html) and “eMarketing: Establishing a Web Presence,” (www.sba.gov/starting_business/marketing/emarketing.html).